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Courage in the face of homophobia

The toughest part of being homosexual at UMaine may well be telling others

How do you define courage? Webster's defines it as "the attitude or response of facing and dealing with anything recognized as dangerous, difficult, or painful, instead of withdrawing from it."

Practical definitions are much easier to recognize. If not, then consider this fact: that same belief being challenged by people who not only hate what you believe in, but hate you as well for believing it. Would standing up to this opposition constitute courage? Let's take the questioning one step further, shall we? Consider this: you don't even have to tell others what you believe in for them to hate you. You may never say a word, and they will still hate you — for the way you look, the way you act or even the type of clothing you wear.

Homophobia is alive and well at the University of Maine. If you don't believe me then look at the letters on the Response page. What was your first thought when you read the letters? Was it something along the lines of "those f*cking faggots"?

If the answer is yes, then take a few minutes and think about why you believe what you believe, and why your violent reaction to the letters came so quickly.

In each of the letters, the individual is merely trying to educate people about what kind of a person he is. He is not posing a threat to your heterosexuality. Rather, he is asking you to accept him as he is, to let him live his life without violent opposition, without fear and without humiliation. Is that too much to ask?

It's safe to say that I would not have written this column four years ago. Like many other students, I came to the University of Maine holding very strong opinions and stereotypes about gay people. Through my years at UMaine, however, I have had the opportunity to meet several gay people and talk to them, quite openly, about the lifestyles they lead, or are forced to hide.

I've learned to accept them for who they are because I took the time to talk to them, to ask them questions, to dispel the many stereotypes I had about gay lifestyles and the people who lead them. The individuals behind the label are in many ways no different than other UMaine students. They enjoy watching weekend sports while eating pizza and sipping a few cold ones. They participate in campus organizations and get involved in community service projects.

They take pride in UMaine and complain just as loudly about the increasing number of mandatory courses. They live, love, get stressed, fail exams, and are just as confused about their future careers as heterosexual students are.

Of the four letter writers, Joseph Nadeau is the only one I have had the opportunity to meet and get to know. Joe and I met two years ago in an Honors class we were both taking, and I got to know him better through his mutual involvement in University Singers. He is a very intelligent individual, a talented musician, and by far one of the most sincere and friendly people I've ever met.

Does it bother me that Joe is gay? Certainly not. Being gay is not like some contagious disease that people should be afraid of catching. It is simply a way of life, and it doesn't change the person Joe is.

For me, Joe Nadeau, Matthew Begin, John Cronin and Jeremiah Gentest are true examples of courage. Knowing the strong feelings of homophobia both on campus and in the state of Maine, these four individuals were still able to publicly admit their homosexuality in letters attempting to break down the walls of prejudice, bigotry and ignorance.

They are fighting for their lives and the ability to lead them as they wish. For some of them, it has taken a strong circle of friends to lean on, to enable them to make their statements public. Joe wrote, "My special thanks to all my friends and supporters, especially those in Wilde-Stein and in the Music Department, without whom I could never have signed my name to this article."

It obviously took a lot for Joe to not only write that letter, but also know that it would be published and read by approximately 12,000 people.

The alienation gay people face is real and very apparent. Jeremiah wrote about the reactions he faced on campus upon his coming out: "It hasn't been all that easy. Some of my teachers don't look me in the eye anymore. People who used to be my friends avoid me — "no time now," they get away from me as quickly as possible; they're probably afraid I'll contaminate them."

I can only imagine how difficult it must be for gay individuals to always have to put up a heterosexual front in order to be socially accepted. I have never had to face this kind of hatred, and if I ever did I don't know whether or not I would be brave enough to let my feelings be known to the public. Ideally, the University of Maine is supposed to be a place where diversity is celebrated — diversity of cultures, of languages, of religions, of sexual preferences. From what I have witnessed, the real situation is a far cry from the ideal one. In your heart, you may never be able to accept gay people, but at least make an attempt to understand what you do not know. Ignorance breeds non-acceptance of others. If diversity is truly flourish at UMaine someday, then think with your mind rather than your prejudices, on this, the next-to-last day of Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Awareness Week.

Coming in the next Verbatim:

- A look behind the scenes of "Our Town," Maine Masque's last play of the year.
- The Writing Center: Neville Hall's unsung heroes.
- Jobs? We don't need no stinking jobs! A look at employment prospects in a depressed economy.